

ROBERT DE ANDREIS



Columnist Robert De Andreis

The black sheep

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

When I moved back home at the onset of my illness, I thought it would be wonderful having my family right here by my side. But getting them to do anything consistently helpful for me has been like pulling teeth.

Usually in families, different members have different jobs. My job is to make everyone feel OK about not helping me. My mom wants to be there for me now but she's never been there for me during the worst traumas of my life. Since I tested positive six years ago, I worked very hard to prepare myself for one of the most devastating things a person can go through. But my Catholic family got ready, as far as I can tell, by praying and going to more Masses. My dozen Catholic aunts and uncles, and nearly all of my Catholic cousins, have never called me once to see how I was doing. My Catholic sister, who lives a mile away, has brought me dinner once in the 658 days I have had full-blown AIDS. My Catholic brother has never taken me to dinner. My Catholic mother said, "I'm not at your beck and call like your father is." She also had the nerve to have a Mass of the Sick for me against my wishes, even though she knows I don't want anything to do with the Catholic church: no burial, Mass or funeral service. If she ends up burying me in the ground against my wishes, please sneak into the cemetery one night, dig me up and cremate me yourself.

After six years since testing positive, my mother finally agreed to have lunch with me, but she had noth-

ing significant to talk about — she had never done any work herself in a way that would have helped me. Even though she was a school counselor, she had never wanted to go to a support group for parents or caregivers, get counseling or read a book on AIDS — even though this would have meant a lot to me. I asked her many times if I could speak to her Family Life class on AIDS, but she always said no and got speakers from CUAV instead. It would have meant so much to me. All her prayers gave her no extra skills on how to support me. She is taking care of her own emotional needs just fine, but there's just nothing left over for me to lean on.

Sometimes, when we did meet, she'd come up with these wild theories about gay life. I finally had to tell her I was sick of it. I'll never forget the words of respect and support she said when I first came out to her years ago: "If I was that way I'd go to a shrink to have him fix it. Why would you want to be a second-class citizen all your life?" But she's much more progressive these days. In fact, the last theory she shared with me was, "Don't you think some priests turn gay because they have to love God, who's a man?" Excuse me?

Last year I took her to see Philadelphia. During the

scene when Tom Hanks is in the hospital with AIDS, she started crying and clutched my hand. Later she said she cried because the scene reminded her of her brother who died of leukemia 40 years ago! Hello? How can she support me if she's so unclear about her own death issues? No, I will never have my mother to take care of me. She even refuses to take a class in hospice care. I would rather die in a hospice surrounded by the professional care of a loving nursing staff and occasional visits from my loving readers without all that weird mom energy.

When little gay kids start innocently playing with gender roles, the parents are alerted that they might have a fag on their hands. My parents insist they never noticed anything different about me despite the fact that I made fabulous Barbie outfits for my sisters, hated sports and only hung out with the girls in school. They knew, and the subtle distancing began. Is that why my parents never gave me therapy or emotional help after the court hearing when I had to testify, at age ten, about the man who dragged me into that men's room? Was I supposed to save up my allowance and see a child psychologist on my own? Every time I try to heal that old wound with them, the day my childhood was shattered, I receive the same flat answer: "We did the best we could." Yes, I know my mom loves me, but there are days it takes more than prayers and credit cards to support me.

When I was growing up, I was pegged the black sheep of the family for pointing out the truth; they called me goofy and paranoid for my noting inequities in the different way they treated me from my straight siblings. They developed this family myth that I was so independent, which meant I could always land on my feet no matter which window I was thrown out of. Was I overreacting two years ago when I received my master's degree and waited until the last people had cleared the stadium, only to find no mom and dad? They had decided to leave early to beat the traffic and I had to walk home in my cap and gown! Or when I flew up from L.A. for a family wedding, with full-blown bronchitis, only to find no one waiting for me — they got lost and couldn't find the gate, so they went home without me! My dad is the only one who has grown with me and is now a true friend. We've forgotten the past together. But my mother started getting jealous about our new closeness and

continued on page 22

DE ANDREIS

continued from page 21

now I don't see anyone anymore. I go to my appointments alone and take the bus to go grocery shopping, and I couldn't be happier.

Recently, a co-worker told my sister, "It must be so sad that your brother is dying of AIDS." She answered, "No actually, all this work he's done on his writing has been a spiritual renewal for the family," which suggests that I am still helping all those people who aren't helping me. Early on I suggested a big family meeting to map out a strategy for help and expectations. But they discarded the plan as impractical; you know, they'd have to get babysitters and all that. Yet every holiday everyone shows up in their perfect outfits, smiling perfect smiles (click!) for the photo albums, and they wonder why I sit there in silence, staring off into space, while my mother turns into psycho grandma, running a manic three-ring circus with the grandkids. What's wrong with this picture? **SFS**